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SUBJECT: DARFUR - LIMITED STAFFING UNDECUTS UNDSS EFFECTIVENESS TO
SUPPORT SAVING LIVES TOGETHER INITIATIVE

Summary

¶1. (U) This is an action request, please see paragraph 12.

¶2. (SBU) Nearly three years after the U.S. Government funded Saving Lives Together Initiative began in Darfur, the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) program continues to be insufficiently staffed to achieve its intended objectives--to enhance sharing of security-related information and facilitate safe humanitarian access to Darfuri beneficiaries. Although current and previous staff members have made heroic efforts to maintain the system and provide coordinated security guidance to international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), human resource delays have limited UNDSS support for the operation and prevented NGOs from receiving the full benefits of the initiative. NGO staff members working in Darfur remain at risk, as evidenced by the recent kidnapping of two international NGO staff in Kutum, North Darfur. Urgent attention is needed to accelerate the deployment of experienced and dedicated NGO liaison officers in order to adequately address the security challenges facing the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Darfur.
End summary.

Saving Lives Together Initiative

¶3. (U) In response to escalating targeting of humanitarian workers and assets, USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) in 2006 provided more than USD 1 million to UNDSS to begin the Saving Lives Together Initiative, designed to provide UNDSS security coordination and liaison officers dedicated to the interests of NGO security in Darfur. The project aimed to enhance NGO coordination with established security networks, facilitate communications systems among various stakeholders to apprise agencies of incidents in real time, improve data collection and analysis for exchange of relevant security and safety information, and initiate joint advocacy regarding safety and security-related issues of common concern. The project funded the establishment of 12 positions dedicated to the project, including four international staff as NGO liaison officers, four national staff security assistants, and four support staff. The four international NGO liaison officers would provide coordinated security advice to

partner NGOs, ensure that relevant security information is disseminated to all humanitarian agencies in the area of operation, conduct regular security briefings, coordinate security training content, and review security weaknesses and suggest improvements.

¶4. (U) The initiative was designed to directly serve 10 to 15 international NGOs, with indirect support through information sharing for the entire humanitarian community. UNDSS required participating NGOs to sign letters of understanding (LOUs) committing them to nominate security focal points, share information, and maintain appropriate confidentiality.

UN Human Resources Delays Leave Posts Vacant

¶5. (SBU) Since 2006, the Saving Lives Together Initiative has never been fully staffed. To date, the initiative has had at most two out of four international staff members serving as NGO liaison officers, and the current NGO liaison officer has been in Darfur for one year as the only international staff member on the project. This liaison officer is currently working to maintain the entire project from his post in El Fasher, North Darfur. Without international staff present in the other duty areas--South Darfur, western West Darfur, and eastern West Darfur--this liaison officer must shoulder responsibility for facilitating as much security support as possible for NGOs in these areas of operation, as well as coordinating the project with UNDSS/Khartoum.

¶6. (SBU) In addition, the project often lacks adequate staffing of national staff security assistants. The program has only recently

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hired a nearly full cadre of national staff; however, these staff members cannot replace the international liaison officers, as they lack access to most sensitive information and must be consistently supervised. In addition, NGOs have expressed discomfort regarding sharing information with national staff, and often do not see the security assistants as a resource for receiving information as well. When the international NGO liaison officer is not present in an area of operation, NGOs only receive one unclassified report containing security information, as this report is the only report the national UNDSS staff may access.

¶7. (SBU) Recruitment of qualified, dedicated staff is admittedly a challenge for a complex, insecure environment such as Darfur. However, as the sole donor for the project, the U.S. Embassy is concerned that UNDSS headquarters will be unable to fully staff the Darfur Saving Lives Together initiative due to competition with other posts for field security coordination officers (FSCOs), despite the clear need for continued circulation of security information and analysis in Darfur and repeated calls for additional support from NGOs. In addition to the overall delays in hiring new staff, UNDSS headquarters recently suggested moving the only NGO liaison on the ground in Darfur to another "priority" post, which would have left the program without any international staff.

¶8. (SBU) In addition to UNDSS fully staffing the four duty stations in El Fasher, Nyala, Zalingei, and El Geneina, NGOs and UNDSS staff on the ground have requested that the Saving Lives Together program deploy a regional project manager based in Darfur to oversee resources, provide overall analysis and guidance regarding security conditions, and coordinate with UNDSS in Khartoum. The regional project manager could also backfill posts when the NGO liaisons go on leave. However, the hiring and deployment of a senior regional project manager is contingent upon full staffing of the other four posts.

¶9. (SBU) In early 2009, both the international NGO Steering Committee and UN-African Union Joint Special Representative Rodolphe Adada delivered letters to UN leadership in Khartoum and New York expressing concern regarding the ongoing delays in project implementation and requesting urgent action to fully staff the initiative. In his January 20 letter to the Under-Secretary-General for UNDSS, Adada noted the critical importance of posting experienced INGO liaison officers in each duty station and requested

Inter-Agency Security Management endorsement for an extension of the project. In its February 1 letter, the NGO Steering Committee acknowledged delays of nearly a year by certain NGOs in signing the LOUs mandated by the program, but emphasized that NGOs had fulfilled the necessary commitments, including nomination of security focal points and enforcement of appropriate confidentiality. The NGO Steering Committee particularly lauded the progress made by the current NGO liaison officer, but noted that slow implementation and continued vacancies were preventing NGOs from realizing the full benefits of the initiative.

¶10. (SBU) In FY 2007 and FY 2009, USAID/OFDA provided a total of USD 2.7 million in additional funding to support staff recruitment and maintain the NGO liaison program. However, in a July 2 meeting, the UNDSS NGO liaison officer informed USAID staff that human resourcing delays continue to hamper full staffing of the program. One new NGO liaison officer is scheduled to join the program and deploy to El Geneina upon visa approval; however, several national staff security assistants are due to leave El Geneina in the coming months. NGO staff have expressed concern that UNDSS will lack a stable presence in the El Geneina area until the new staff member arrives and learns the position. In addition, the NGO liaison officer noted that understaffing has limited the capacity of the project to provide security trends and analysis for its stakeholders, reducing the initiative's utility.

¶11. (SBU) The Embassy has continued to fund the NGO liaison initiative, despite the staffing delays, due to the high priority USAID/OFDA places on NGO staff security and the request by NGOs for such an initiative. When funding life-saving programs in insecure locations such as Darfur, USAID/OFDA takes into consideration the risks that agencies face in implementing these essential activities.

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By funding the UNDSS Saving Lives Together initiative, the Mission is supporting the dissemination of key security information and safety practices to NGOs, a service that would be otherwise unavailable. The Embassy remains committed to NGO staff security in Darfur and to an increasingly robust Saving Lives Together program.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) The UNDSS Saving Lives Together Initiative has the potential to facilitate a safer and more secure humanitarian operation in Darfur, providing key guidance to NGO staff and developing a much clearer understanding of security trends and risks in particular locations. However, after receiving three years of USG funding, this program should be fully operational, not in a constant state of understaffing. Ongoing delays to full implementation of the initiative are unacceptable, particularly given the importance of the safety and security role that this project plays for humanitarian workers in Darfur. As such, the Embassy urges USUN to engage actively with UNDSS to ensure that the Saving Lives Together Initiative receives increased attention and staffing in the coming months. One recommendation is for the UN to allocate adequate resources to UNDSS and allow for sufficient numbers of FSCOs in the field to respond to rapidly changing global demands for these specialists. In addition, the Mission will continue to press UNDSS to rapidly identify and hire qualified staff for the project and advocate for political support for this critical initiative and by extension, for humanitarians working to serve the people of Darfur.

WHITEHEAD